

An Interview with Miguel Vale de Almeida

1. How do you see the theme of the sea in Portuguese culture? What is its value and importance?

I think that “the sea” functions as a key-symbol in Portuguese culture. Representations of the sea as a central theme probably started as literary artifacts that were part of the process of constructing a national identity by the cultural elites and the state. The notion then percolated to the popular masses. I doubt that the rural common folk of, say, the nineteenth century, adhered to it but the appropriation of Camões’s work as a narrative of the national experience became, in due time, part of the core of the imagined community. The theme of the sea certainly is connected, after the nineteenth century, with the central role of expansion, discoveries, and colonialism in national identity. The fact that the sea as symbol and metaphor can be used romantically to evoke adventure, freedom, self-discovery, voyage, and so on probably facilitated its general appropriation and toned down aggressive nationalistic overtones. I do not have data on that, but probably a young person in 2019 would talk about the sea in a way that bundles meanings, from the discoveries, to beach culture, to surfing, to “you’ll find Portuguese anywhere in the world,” to notions of Portugal as “Europe’s West Coast.”

2. How has Portuguese anthropology dealt with the maritime theme?

The strong romantic tradition of studying rural communities and peasant society as the essence of the “folk,” which characterized early anthropology (and was refashioned as the study of the popular classes in the post-dictatorial period), did not leave room for “the sea.” In addition, Portuguese colonial anthropology (relatively weak when compared to other imperial formations) was mostly concerned with the administration of colonized populations, not with historical processes (a very different story can be told about History). In recent decades, however, with the reconstruction of Portuguese anthropology and its internationalization, including the growth of postcolonial and post-imperial studies, anthropologists have been instrumental in the critique and deconstruction of the prevailing lusotropicalist narrative. This endeavor involved a cultural

analysis of the sea symbol and metaphor and of the ways in which it romanticizes aspects that legitimize its nationalist, colonialist, and racist roots.

3. Do you believe that Portugal still glorifies the sea as an avatar of Portuguese-ness, as a metonym of bravery?

One of the most disturbing aspects of democratic Portugal's society and culture is the survival and adaptation of the lusotropicalist narrative, including the sea symbol. This seems to indicate that it has become a central feature of national identity, cutting across social classes, regions, cultural capitals, and so forth. From tourism branding to history textbooks, it is truly hegemonic and is articulated by "the man on the street" in automatic fashion. Its survival in the democratic period may be part of a phenomenon of compensation: for loss of empire, for high rates of emigration, for European integration, for the homogenizing effects of globalization. The democratic period tried to refashion the lusotropicalist narrative as "universalist" and "intercultural," but this only contributed to its continuation and its whitewashing.

4. Recently, there has been public debate about the possibility of creating a Museum of the Discoveries in Lisbon. Many say that a museum with such a name would further glorify an archaic Portuguese history and negate the impacts of slavery and colonialism. Others see this name as reasonable and natural. Where do you stand on this issue?

Let me resort to sarcasm: the entire country is already a big Museum of the Discoveries, from monuments and street names, to official and commercial iconography, to almost any aspect of collective life. I use *museum* in a vernacular, pejorative sense, meaning something old and stuffy, and *discoveries* in the politically charged tone of the dictatorship. This does not mean that the country has no room - cultural and political - for a museum of "that-which-was-called-the-discoveries". If it were to exist, such a museum should be a space for critical questioning, for conflicting narratives, for the visibility of what has been invisible for so long. The first step should be not using the term *discoveries*. What is the alternative? I do not know. And we should seriously think about what "I do not know" means. Could it mean that such a museum is impossible, not to say undesirable? I tend to think so, in a more radical fashion ("Let's stop this nonsense once and for all, and start imagining ourselves as something else"). But "the sea," "the discoveries," "lusotropicalism," and even the democratic refashionings of

“universalism and interculturalism” are entwined and entrenched. This makes these tropes virtually impossible to eliminate from the national narrative and very difficult to resignify.

5. Do you think that Portugal is yet to come to terms with its slaver past, which owes much to the glorification of the seas?

Of course. And the debate on the Museum of the Discoveries is relevant to how we address the memory of slavery and slave traffic and, crucially, how we ignite a renewed anti-racist activism. Recently, a proposal put forward by Djass – Associação de Afrodescendentes for a monument to enslaved people won the competition in Lisbon’s *orçamento participativo*. No such monument was ever proposed by official entities, even when in the hands of officials or parties on the Left—the same that seem to lack critical perspective on anything concerning “the discoveries.” Simultaneously, there has been a strong debate about Portugal’s historical role in slave traffic in the op-ed sections of the major newspapers and in social media. This debate is inseparable from political positions on Portuguese colonialism and the adapted continuation of colonial formations in post-colonial Portugal—namely, in what concerns racism and the critique of the popular (and official) narrative of Portugal as a “non-racist country.” Actually, I tend to think that at the center of the emotional maelstrom in the debates around the discoveries and slavery is the denial of racism in Portugal.

Interview conducted in 2018.

MIGUEL VALE DE ALMEIDA (PhD, ISCTE, 1994) is a Portuguese anthropologist, LGBT activist, and professor at the Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa (Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa). He is the current editor-in-chief of the journal *Etnográfica* and member of CRIA (Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia) and APA (Associação Portuguesa de Antropologia).

ANDRÉ NÓVOA (PhD, Royal Holloway, 2014) is a geographer who previously trained as an historian and anthropologist. He was a researcher at Northeastern University (USA) and an assistant editor of *HAU Magazine: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. His work has been published in journals such as *Mobilities* and *Environment & Planning*. In “The Colour of Labour” project, he is directly involved with the study of mobilities, addressing the movements of whalers, the journeys of indentured migrants, and the entanglements of labor and mobility.